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ABSTRACT

Collaboration is beginning to be encouraged as colleges and schools search for ways to transcend the isolated circumstances of the independent scholar and the traditional classroom. Three collaborative projects that can be effective in preservice teacher education classes are: (1) a partnership with single school; (1) a partnership with a group of schools; and (3) a partnership with a distant college. All three projects helped students to transcend the boundaries of the classroom in their rural college, particularly important because their college is one of those "idyllic" colleges created to isolate and sanctify the independent scholar. In a mini-partnership with a single school, English education students responded to writings by students from a suburban senior high school. In a second move into the community, students collaborated with 15 schools throughout New York State to publish a collaborative newsletter, "Book Links," which related to young adult literature. College students contacted teachers whom they knew and, in some cases, visited their classes to request student participation. Last year copies of the newsletter went to 400 eighth graders from 15 schools. The third project enabled students to share common interests about literacy teaching via e-mail with preservice teachers in the distant South. The transition to collaborative-oriented teaching is not a smooth one as many of the students resist it because of ideological devotion to traditional practices. The three projects shifted the boundaries of the classroom and in the process fostered less competitive, more humanistic environments and advanced the learning of the participants. Contains 11 references. (TB)

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Transcending Boundaries of the Independent Scholar: The Role of Institutional Collaborations

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Today, teachers of writing sometimes find themselves at colleges situated on mountain tops or nestled in isolated valleys with offices inside ivy covered buildings. Our nineteenth century forefathers intentionally positioned their institutions of learning in these isolated locations where scholars might remove themselves from the world to ponder tomes in their library carrels. "Enlightenment philosophy," according to Sullivan (1994) "made the individual the source and foundation of knowledge," and the production of this universal knowledge required "the mind's isolation and detachment from the social world--from the particularities of time and place and from the contingencies of lived experience" (p. 14). Still pervasive in our culture, Sullivan contends that the independent scholar is both a social and ideological construct. Besides historical origins, the concept of independent scholar is "steeped in a philosophical and institutional history that has made the suppression of others. . .one of the conditions of its own realization" (p. 17). Thus, as a competitive student/researcher, the individual scholar looks to his or her own interests rather than to those of others. A closer look at these scholars, however, suggests that even among them existed an unacknowledged interdependence that often went hidden, even in the case of Einstein whose first wife appears to have collaborated with him in formulating his theories of space and time (Sullivan, p. 11).

Today such collaborations are coming out of the closet and beginning to be encouraged as colleges and schools search for ways to transcend the

isolated circumstances of the independent scholar and the traditional classroom this scholar inhabited. Indeed, Cushman (1996) contends that "without a praxis that moves between community and university, . . .we [as rhetoricians and writing teachers] risk reproducing the hegemonic barriers separating the university from the community. . . [and] become guilty of applying our theories from the sociological 'top-down,' instead of informing our theories from the 'bottom-up.' She worries that "many value the idea more than the people, a value that bolsters the sociological distance of the university from the community" (p. 24). As college teachers interested in writing and literacy and in the education of future teachers, we need to find ways to foster collaborations that will move students away from their isolated solitary study on mountain tops and that will make them aware of the larger community of which they are a part.

The search for such collaborations has been a prime motivator as I have tried to broaden the perspectives of future teachers of writing. As their literacy education teacher, I wanted these future teachers to experience collaborations that would extend their vision beyond our own classroom walls so that in their own teaching, they might find ways to use literacy for outreach projects that provide authentic literacy experiences. Collaborative projects with three different institutional arrangements provided such experiences: 1) a partnership with a single school, 2) a partnership with a group of schools, and 3) a partnership with a distant college. All three projects shifted the pedagogy of the college class to more student-centered learning and led students away from writing for grades to using literacy for social purposes, supporting Heath's (1990) view of literacy as "learners talking and considering together." All three projects enabled my students to transcend the boundaries of the classroom in their rural college, particularly

important since their college is one of those "idyllic" colleges created to isolate and sanctify the independent scholar.

Institutional Collaborations

In a mini-partnership with a single school, English Education students responded to writings by students from a suburban senior high school. Though an Internet exchange might have been preferable, the schools I contacted did not have network access. Thus, my teacher role extended to that of mail carrier so the secondary students could receive their papers in a timely fashion. As a commuter to the rural school, I was able to fill this role reasonably well, though the problem of absent students on both ends demanded extra stops. The project was a motivator for my preservice students who wished for more contact with real students in their learning but attended a college whose budgets and scheduling limited class visits to the schools at this stage in their education. Even in the previous year when we had worked with sample papers from past secondary students, the preservice teachers did not display the same feeling of immediacy as in this project. In responding to writing of actual students, students began to see how their theoretical study of writing finally had some meaning. When they realized that actual students would be reading their comments, they took note of Anson's (1989) taxonomy of response styles--dualist, relativist, or reflective. Students now had specific choices to make, as theory became intertwined with practice. Using their peer groups as resources, they read and responded to the papers as a group so that the secondary students benefited from colaboration within the classroom as well. An added benefit to this institutional collaboration was a visit from the veteran secondary English teacher who, having assigned the papers, was able to give the context for the

writing and reinforce our earlier discussions about the writing process. Such visits afford collaboration between teachers as well as students and begin to break down the walls of the "the separate power structures of the two environments" which, according to Mason et al. (1994, p. 133) remain difficult to permeate.

In a second move into the community, students collaborated with 15 schools throughout New York State to publish a collaborative newsletter, *Book Links*, relating to young adult literature. College students contacted teachers whom they knew and, in some cases, visited their classes to request student participation. Last year copies of the newsletter went to 400 eighth graders from 15 schools. The students contributed comments about their favorite books, and college students combined the data for several up-beat articles for the publication and also judged writing submissions, another feature of the newsletter. The college students also read current adolescent fiction and prepared articles on books that would interest eighth graders. By participating in the project, future teachers developed an understanding of writing for publication as they read, reviewed, and proofed articles and considered layout that would appeal to their eighth grade audience--the age of individuals they would soon be teaching. The future teachers also learned about the value of institutional collaborations despite the complexities of organizing them. This particular project authentic literacy project motivated both secondary and college students to read and respond to young adult literature in a more engaged manner than they might otherwise have done. By introducing an authentic literacy experience such as this one, reading and writing for grades diminished and using literacy for social purposes took precedence.

To transcend the boundaries of independent learning, the third project enabled students to share common interests about literacy teaching with preservice teachers in the distant South. The project turned to electronic mail for these connections. The proposed pen pal project had a number of goals including learning about teacher education programs in another part of the country, reflecting on readings and concepts related to literacy teaching, and discovering the value of authentic writing situations. As the boundaries of the class were extended, a real-world context for literacy emerged.

With students in the South using E-mail for the first time and many of my students in the North reluctant users of the medium, initial computer problems were prevalent though not atypical of other such projects (Fey, 1994). Student complaints ranged from an "awful time with this computer," "the computer crashed" to "this is the second time I've tried to send a message and I tore up the computer in the process." Connection problems were complicated by several inactive pen pans, limited computer access, and a back log on the Internet due to the Oklahoma bombing. Nevertheless the short 5-week E-mail project had benefits that paved the way for a second project now in process.

The collaboration enabled students time for reflecting on their various cultures. Those of us surrounded by snow even in April languished in a student's comment that "the river is beautiful here now that the flowers are in bloom," and we understood better when she wrote about her 60-mile commute in order to live in her "beautiful, small Southern town full of trees, flowers, and restored antebellum houses." Many students still held stereotypical beliefs about the cultures in the South and the North. One student wrote, " I am sure all of you up north love to make fun of Southerners. I guess we do have a lifestyle all of our own." A student from a

"northern" Southern state clarified that "he was not a "hick" because he attended this college in the deep South, and another mentioned that he was pleased to be at the college even though he had gone from New Orlean's "French Quarter" to peanut-farm land. One Southern student shared, "When I heard we would be writing to students in the North, I was really scared because people from the South aren't looked very highly upon. But I can tell we've been misled." A Northern student commented on the unfavorable image of New Yorker's rudeness but assured her new acquaintance that "we aren't so bad."

As students moved to a discussion of Anson's (1989) response styles, they reflected on their own development as writers. For example, one student noted that she was learning to "respect other views" yet realized that "my views are just as important and meaningful." Another became aware of the inappropriateness of the cluttered red marks she had received on some of her earlier papers, and still another student noted the difficulty of peer editing when the other person's paper is "not in the same style." Approaches to the teaching of grammar were aired in the context of Jordon's (1985) poignant description of the grammar of Black English. Other students told about the power of learning in small groups and shared an the end-of-year dramatic culminating experience for Knowles' *A Separate Peace*. The project involved a "video-camera, a dummy named Tall Paul, a 125 foot cliff and a couple of smart-time actors." In reference to the project, one future teacher remarked, "I wasn't anticipating all the preparation we had to do but it was worth it though." For students who were begrudging some of their literature assignments, it was refreshing to hear from a student about her "joy" in reading literary classics like "Dickens, Bronte, Browning, and Keats." A student from my own class shared the details of the institutional

collabaoration involving responding to real student writing. Though initially students were perplexed at the time spent on even one paper, this student commented, "The project has caused me to reflect a great deal on my own experience as a student. I can recall times when teachers simply put a grade on our papers without any comments and we wondered if the teachers had even read out work. This has made me sympathetic to the feelings of students--their work should be treated with respect." Students from both areas of the country acknowledged their "insecurities" about the forthcoming student-teaching experience.

Reflections on Institutional Collaboration and Authentic Writing

Though in final analysis students saw benefits to the projects, learning that transcends classroom boundaries and involves other people in the learning process brings with it tensions (Fey & Smith, 1994). The process is not smooth and indeed causes some despair, particularly at the beginning of such projects. In moving from the traditional paradigm of independent scholar to more collaborative learning, whether within the classroom or in projects that transcend classroom boundaries, ideological constraints sometimes hinder this turn, for students accustomed to classroom practices of competition embedded in the curriculum are often more comfortable facing forward in their traditional rows in search of universal knowledge than moving alongside fellow collaborators in the construction of knowledge. One student explained her resistance to transcending the boundaries of the independent scholar: "I had always enjoyed success by being better than my peers." And another high-achieving student, dedicated to "multiple choice tests, unannounced quizzes, and a straightforward breakdown of each assignment and its points toward the final grade," explained, " I was trained

by these traditional methods and felt secure by them." Yet broadening classrooms as nurturing communities is imperative to our survival in the 21st century.

Collaborative projects that extend the boundaries of classroom learning often reflect the "messiness" of the classroom referred to by Schemann (1993). For Schemann, teachers have been unwilling to relinquish the security of the firm structures of traditional education partly because they have separated the "context of discovery" from the "context of justification." In feminist language, "the epistemic project of the privileged [in this case, the teachers]. . . has been. . .to distance themselves sufficiently from the contaminating influences of the body [the students] so that what they [the privileged] believe will come to have the status of knowledge" (p. 196). The above experience suggests that this separation has been so habitual that initially even students resist the "messiness" of discovery, the insecurity of inquiry and exposure to new ways of thinking and learning. In shifting classroom boundaries to more collaborative structures, teachers must acknowledge students' insecurity and lead them to expect tensions commensurate with any real-world experience. Gradually students will recognize that the learning from authentic literacy experience is more valuable than the security of known answers. By being open to the process of discovery through institutional collaboration, we may lead our students to appreciate the learning that comes from collaborative thinking. At the same time, such learning moves students to develop responsibility for their own learning.

The three projects described above shifted the boundaries of the classroom and in the process fostered less competitive, more humanistic environments for the development of literacy. Though the projects were not without their "messiness," each advanced the learning of its participants. In

reflecting on the E-mail project, a student described "its effectiveness on the learning process" as "wonderful." For this student, it was "exciting to learn that someone in a different part of the country seems to think along the same lines as I do." Similar to the real world projects described by Peckman (1996), involvement in authentic, collaborative literacy experiences enables students to become more active learners. Such real world projects serve to develop a collaborative orientation in classrooms that, according to Fox, Bleich, and Reagan (1994), can "help students and teachers create interpersonal contacts of such range and consequence that schools may become, in all parts of society, the sites of nurturance and cultivation. . ." (p. 5). These sites benefit future teachers of writing in their own education and in modeling an important paradigm for their students' education.

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